Untitled

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U N T I T L E D

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UNTITLED

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Introduction: On Titles and Un-titles

In its earliest usage in English the noun "title" designated the plaque reading "King of the Jews" which was placed above the cross on Calvary upon which Jesus suffered. The Lindisfarne gospel from ca. 950 uses the word in exactly this sense as defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary*: "An inscription placed on or over an object, giving its name or describing it" (*OED* Online, http://www.oed.com). Later, the noun migrated into the more general and familiar denotation for our age, namely to mean: "The name of a book, a poem, or other (written) composition; an inscription at the beginning of a book, describing or indicating its subject, contents, or nature, and usually also giving the name of the author, compiler, or editor, the name of the publisher, and the place and date of publication". This usage, which *OED* here explains in a perhaps surprisingly full description of the paratextual functions of the title and by extension the page on which it is placed in books, is first recorded in 1340 as an instance of a title given to a sequence of psalms. Both senses of the noun "title" have thus developed out of religiously motivated acts of textuality, and it is intriguing to speculate on how far titles and the act of titling still may be traveling with connotations from this genesis.

The present collection of three papers focuses on the use and function of titles in various cases of postmodern American and Scottish literature. While the postmodern may at first glance appear to seek to transcend the religious practices of yesteryear and associate itself with a distrust of grand narratives such as Christianity, it may as easily be claimed that much postmodern literature in fact investigates the interstices between narrative traditions and conventions, in order to explore what might be left of the sublime or mystical in narratives and in textuality per se. Thus, the authors of the present papers are justified in submitting these apparently humble and frugal thresholds of texts (to paraphrase Gerard Genette's notion of how the paratext functions) to such close scrutiny. In fact, the papers specifically engage with such instances of titles and titling as may be termed problematic titling, conspicuous over-titling, limit titles, or meta-titles, all with a view to

understanding more clearly why texts seem reluctant to do without titling, even while professing their very untitled state. This irreducible paradox, that even "Untitled" is of necessity a title when placed in its appropriate site, is a presence all three papers circle around, although none of them analyzes any specific text actually titled "Untitled".

Camelia Elias' paper, "Expropriated Titles in Lynn Emanuel's Poetry of Impropriety", while sounding like a treatise on legal and moral issues regarding property rights and the (im)proper, is in actual fact an extended meditation on the function of titles and the two specific words crucial to all titling efforts, "Untitled" and "Title". In her exploration of the hermeneutics of reading titled texts vs. reading untitled ones Elias argues that to "title" involves the reader in a hermeneutics of desire (when we see a title we want to interpret it), whereas seeing the title, "Untitled", modifies our expectations and involves us in a hermeneutics of suspicion. She further discusses the questions of agency involved in titling, and the reinstatement of authorial subjectivity in works which engage with the titled/untitled dichotomy. Elias' specific object texts are poems by Lynn Emanuel, particularly the tantalizingly titled text, "In Search of a Title". This poem is shown to be a portrait of the creative process, which seems curiously incomplete and incompletable, until the moment when the poet settles on a title, which then may provide the much vaunted closure many postmodern texts seem to seek, all the while proclaiming that closure is impossible. In this, as in many of her poems in the collection *Then, Suddenly*– Emanuel works out a meta-poetics, which teases the reader and potential critic with a game of titling, naming, masking and unmasking, impersonation and impropriety.

Søren Balle tackles the issue of problematic titling in the practice of American poet, John Ashbery. Balle notices the presence of a number of apparently marginalized poems in Ashbery's oeuvre which all share the feature of playfully refusing a final entitlement (authorial or otherwise) in the nature of fixing themselves on a straightforward inscription, "describing or indicating its subject" (to again parse the OED definition). Of these poems, which we designate by that appellation mainly because they 'look like' poems, Balle especially focuses on the poem (problematically) titled "Title Search" from the 1994 collection, *And the Stars Were Shining*, which is an extreme case of foregrounding of the practice of titling and its futility. Balle's detailed analysis of this text shows that in his act of creating poetry-like textual objects Ashbery is

preoccupied with a titular quest or rather a quest for entitlement of meaning. As Balle extends his argument to poetical practice in general, he argues that poems should therefore be regarded rather as extensions of their titles, or meta-titles in endless deferral of their actual poetic utterance. Considered in this way poems lose their title to the name of poetry, and therefore become generically untitled.

Bent Sørensen addresses the conspicuous titling practices of Scottish novelist and short story writer, Alasdair Gray, and situates this discussion in the larger context of this author's generally excessive paratextual strategies, including illustrations, the use of emblems and other visual embellishment, as well as other, often neo-Baroque textual features, such as page and chapter titles. A further context is supplied by the paper's musings on the effect on packaging and marketing which Gray's characteristic and eccentric use of paratext may be seen to have when his paratext transforms obscure and ineffectual individual pieces of writing (short stories) into political statements inscribed in the author's desire for marking a Scottish particularism and incipient independence.

Gray's novel, *Poor Things*, is briefly analyzed as a counterpoint to the three collections of short fiction which are compared in the main portions of the paper. This novel is in fact a particularly apt example of Gray's tendency to over-title, bearing the unwieldy full title of: *Poor Things: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer, Edited by Alasdair Gray*. This amount of titular weight (almost certainly an attempt at a pastiche of and half-salute to, half-mockery of Laurence Sterne's baroque novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*) is enough to make the reader despair of accurately reproducing the work's "name", but paradoxically the long title fails in its attempt to subsume the full contents of the work itself, its genesis and reproduction, thereby rendering redundant the text following the title (which we might for now improperly name the 'text proper'). The title's attempted expropriation of the function to which the 'text proper' is more appropriately entitled backfires on the title and makes it lose that authority which it would otherwise have had in fixing the work in its readers' memory. The work might then to all intents and purposes be regarded as 'untitled' by its own attempts at (self)entitlement.

The texts discussed in this volume are engaged in a poetic endeavour with many points of similarity. Whether the texts are hybrids of the lyrical and the narrative as in the case of Emanuel, or mock the conventions of

the lyric by emulating something as prosaic as a computer search as in the case of Ashbery, or challenge the reader with a maze of prose with many clearly signposted entrances which all lead into halls of mirrors as in the case of Gray, the textual universes which the over-determined (un)titles open onto challenge us as readers to think in meta-textual and philosophical terms.

Titling, which after all is a prerequisite for making, presenting and making present a book, is in all three cases denaturalized and flaunted as an unnatural practice. In response, the three papers all engage with the strange, but ludic, practices in the object texts and, not least in their own discourse. Paratext is thus shown to be nothing if not a playground for textual workers in all genres. "There, untitled and unknown, may we fix our home" (*Canterbury Tales*, (not by Chaucer, but a five-volume work appropriating his title, penned in 1797 – 1805 by Harriet and Sophia Lee)).

Bent Sørensen
Aalborg 2005

Expropriated Titles in Lynn Emanuel's Poetry of Impropriety

Camelia Elias

A title in painting as well as written text is a paratext[1] which explores the relationship between the viewer or reader and the work under the title, the artist or writer and the title itself, and the artist or writer and influence. The specific title, "Untitled", explores expectations of the unexpected and constitutes a movement towards searching. "Untitled" is a dynamic concept and reveals a meta-consciousness about itself insofar as it predicates all nominal functions. Although "title" and "untitled" cannot be juxtaposed, insofar as they do not share the same morphological level – "Title" is a noun, "Untitled" is an adjective – they do share some of the same paratextual functions. Whereas "Untitled" is an extremely common title which we encounter both in painting as well as literature, "Title" is something we have, not something we call "Title", which is to say that there are not many works whose title is "Title". "Title" uses its potential to name, define, describe, explain, represent, and interpret. "Untitled" on the other hand is a paratext and a meta-paratext. "Untitled" is both a title and a title of a title. The difference between "title" and "untitled" is that the first is a fixation with the potential to engage expectation, while the latter is a movement towards the kind of expectation which is held down until something happens. So "title" stands still, whereas "untitled" moves.

To title involves the reader in a hermeneutics of desire: when we see a title we want to interpret it. Seeing the title, "Untitled", modifies our expectations and involves a hermeneutics of suspicion. Moreover, when we see the title of a work being "Untitled" we think of double agency. Is the work titled "Untitled" so titled by the author, or does it bear the name "Untitled" by default? "Untitled" thus seems to expropriate "Title" of its own primary function, which is to tell a story. Expropriation takes

1 See also Gerard Genette's influential book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987). More elaborations on Genette's terms can be found in this issue in Hattesen Balle and Sørensen's essays.

place when "Untitled" stands as a title to a work – and here I renounce the inverted commas around title for generic purposes, thus indicating that "Untitled" is always a proper name, while title is a common noun. I am interested in expropriation, not in its common usage of depriving of property, but in its more archaic form which indicates the voluntary renunciation of property or propriety, the *proprius*, one's own (self).

While titles appropriate by taking images or themes from the work they ultimately name, and then accommodate these images to the language that ultimately forms the work at stake, "Untitled" undoes the act of appropriation by expropriating first the agent, and then the agent's property. Therefore expropriation refers to the state of "Untitled" in its meta-paratextual form. We can say that writers and artists expropriate themselves when they use "Untitled" as a title. In its original sense, expropriating oneself means voluntarily giving up one's property, that which belongs to oneself. Ultimately what one gives up is oneself. However, "Untitled" by default is a second-hand act of expropriation. Curators or publishers name the works left untitled by artists "Untitled" for lack of a better term. Expropriation in this case happens at the point where the act of titling takes place in the gap, in lieu of, instead of another proper name.

One other distinction we can make in relation to the link between "Title" and "Untitled", which expropriation marks, is the difference between style and manner. Whereas we can talk about titles as a matter of style, when titles represent not just the form of the work but also its content, "Untitled" marks a manner of presentation which replaces the representation of form/content dichotomy with function. An example of title as style may be found in the message that links reading (the title) with expectation (not from the title but from the work): what you see is what you get (the reverse is, however, also possible). "Untitled" as manner offers a different relation: You cannot see the woods (work) for the trees (title) – therefore the work is left untitled. Thus words such as "title" and "untitled" conjure up a significant relation of difference between seeing and reading, writing and seeing. While "title" is more closely related to reading insofar as it has a narrative potential, the adjective "untitled", while nevertheless a title in its own right even though it is disguised, or masked by its own paratext, calls for seeing beyond expectation. When reading a title, one expects to see a certain symmetry between the title and the work which the title accompanies. Seeing a title such as "untitled"

transforms reading (for we do read the letters) into a hermeneutics of desire. Whereas "title" marks a strategy of reading and seeing, "untitled" marks a poetics of the title's strategy by taking into account the act of writing. Unlike "title" whose function is to name and represent, "untitled" goes beyond naming to presenting writing to itself. "Untitled" is the manner of expropriating a title's style.

In her poem, "In Search of a Title", from her celebrated collection of poems and prose poems *Then, Suddenly*– (1999) Lynn Emanuel begins with a contemplation of an untitled work in the process not only of being created, but becoming a creation beyond description. The poem has four stanzas and it constitutes two moments of, first, "Untitled", represented in the first two stanzas, and second, "Title", represented in the last two stanzas. The speaker in the poem begins with a contemplation of the woods outside her porch where she sits both staring at the trees and reading *The New York Book Review*:

> In *The Book Review* I read that nature is making
> a comeback which is one more thing to make me feel
> geeky and out-of-step. When's the literature
> of boarded-up shore towns coming back? As usual,
> I'm staring at the woods. (Emanuel, 1999: 50)

Towards the end of the second stanza the speaker realizes that she has been writing a poem for which she has no title. The need for titling grows out of the two first stanzas where the speaker's concern in the first one is with the text that she reads, while in the second stanza she is preoccupied with the object of reading from where she also seeks inspiration for her own work:

> Rachel Carson is saying, "If you understand nature,
> you will never be afraid or alone." So, I've set myself
> this small, unpleasant task: Describe the Tree as Though
> You Like It. (50)

The speaker shifts from contemplating the trees outside her house to reading about trees in her review. As the reading is interrupted by looking at the woods, the idea of taking the tree and describing it occurs to the speaker as a possibility for titling. Thus the title grows out of an

"untitled" situation in which the tree is not being represented yet as a final possibility for a title. Rather the tree is presented as a characteristic for the manner in which a description of the tree would yield final results, here a title.

In the last two stanzas, where again we have a similar shift from text to object, the search for a title becomes more concrete and assumes self-conscious proportions as the speaker initiates a dialogue between writer, nature, and the nature of titling:

> a dogwood hovered above me, so thick and bright,
> it was as though the woods had spun a ghost; its pale
> and sloppily anthropomorphic form was more spacious
> and more flexible than "Tree". Humble and penetrating.
> Those are words that occur to me. Also, "dizzying
> freshet," but I reject that in favor of something less
> well-dressed. It's "spiffy" and "imprudent." The tree
> that is. That's why I like it. That white is a loose
>
> shirttail. Does it seem like bragging to say it reminds
> me of myself? I'd like to cast off Symbolisms – the need
> to stuff Thought and Feeling into the strongbox of Nature.
> What a giddy slosh of white ectoplasm the dogwood left
> on that blue sky. I'd like just to proceed, strolling along,
> side by side, as it were, immaculate, but unkempt. "White,"
> occurs to me. And "Naked." (51–52)

Although the speaker refers to *The Book Review* in the first stanza, a review that also works as an index for new titles on the market, she does not mention any titles as such. Thus the reference remains linked to a thematic account of a title, or several titles, dealing with a certain topic, here nature. Yet the representation of nature in the poem remains detached from its symbolism by the insertion of a momentary pause registered in the act of staring. "I'm staring at the woods", the speaker declares thus indicating a moment when nothing happens between thought and action, between thinking and writing. When staring, the gaze goes beyond the object in question to something imaginary yet related to the object which holds the viewer's fascination in check.

Thinking is held in suspension and constitutes the act of staring in its untitled mode.

The speaker is obviously playing here with the idiom: "I can't see the woods for the trees". One way of avoiding missing the woods is by titling it. Consequently, the speaker seems to suggest in the last two stanzas that perhaps "Tree" is not a good idea for a title if it is the woods one wants to see. Going from "Tree" to other words, which I also take as variations for titles such as "Humble and penetrating", and then to marking "spiffy and "imprudent" as more likely candidates for titles as they are put in inverted commas, seems to suggest that the decision to title is linked to the desire to stylize the poem. The reason why the speaker ultimately renounces "Tree" as a title is precisely because it lacks style. As the wood takes on an anthropomorphic form suggesting a ghost-like cloud, the tree is seen in that relation as merely an object without the potential to represent. Thus, the desire is to keep searching for a title, the desire is to keep acting on behalf of staring at the wood and at the ghost, and thus make the untitled element in both expropriate the proper in a title.

Pausing to consider the act of reading titles and reviewing them makes the speaker in the poem weary of the very task of titling. For titles function as witnesses to books' being. An untitled work has no such witnesses, for which reason we can talk about a process of becoming which books and art alike engage in. Perhaps the idea of witnessing is what the speaker of the poem has in mind when references are made to the verticality of trees. In their vertical position trees remain in their potential state of becoming paper, they remain untitled works, whereas once down, trees are more likely to meet their (titular) fate in the form of books. Trees standing seem to assume agency and become themselves witnesses to changes in nature. Trees turned into paper, on the other hand, go back to being objects, yet witnessing this time the elaboration of writing, here in the form of titles. Regarding nature, a quick look at the results on searching for titles written by Rachel Carson, the well known scientist and environmental activist mentioned in the poem, discloses that there is a least one other book apart from Carson's own famous *Silent Spring* (1962) that bears a significant relation to the review that the speaker of the poem might be reading, namely *Witness for Nature* (1997), a biography of Carson's life written by environmental historian Linda J. Lear.

These speculations are prompted by Emanuel herself, insofar as the reader is invited to do her own searching for titles outside the poem. And yet, there is nothing outside the text, as Derrida famously proclaimed in his *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1974: 158), as our searching takes its point of departure not in reality but in fiction. We leave from the premise that the specific references in the poem to people and books correspond to a reality which we are in the position to identify. This reality is, however, represented as if in waiting to receive a title. Reality, then, is a representation of the untitled. Thus we are invited to consider the nature of the various concretizations of specific references that take place in the poem.

The speaker of Emanuel's poem herself concretizes issues such as writing, the nature of writing, the nature of nature, and the nature of any nature. The theme of nature is thus linked to the imagery of silence represented by the waiting for the return of the literature of "boarded-up shore towns". Together, nature and silence form the context of witnessing by staring, when 'nothing' happens. However, outside the (con)text of contemplation, something does happen, as a title, or 'nothing' more than an "imprudent" feeling marks the arrival of a sense for a certain title. This sense is needed insofar as it is the only thing which begins the process of specification. One titles a work, or a thought, in order to make it specific. In his paratextually playful essay, "Title (to be specified)", Jacques Derrida makes the following remark: "*the sense of the title is a certain manner of not having any and its event is one of not taking place*" (Derrida, 1981: 13; author's emphasis). Searching for titles is already a proleptic untitled act which mediates between the manner of not having any titles and the style of making 'nothing' specific. This much is clear from the way Emanuel's poem ends, with titles such as "White" and "Naked". Each of these titles stands for nature and nothing in their own way. While waiting for the literature of "boarded-up shore towns" (or rather paratexts in their own right) we are made to return to the blank of the white page and leave the event that does not take place naked.

Furthermore, in Emanuel's poem the theme of nature becomes a trope of imagery which puts an untitled mark on silence. Reading books and thinking about potential titles to title one's own books with is an activity which breaks nature's silent being. The observation that the speaker makes in the first line of the poem, "the woods are still here", coupled with the following question: "Can't the trees do something

besides vertical?" is an attempt to recreate an ambiance in which the natural state of a tree takes on a symbolic quality as it moves into the normative social language as a title. The first title that comes to the speaker's mind is "Tree", but then it quickly gets dismissed insofar as "Tree" as a title does not fulfill the function of documentary representation.

Titles for Emanuel must operate as free agents. Therefore the representation of titles does not have an indexical quality to it. It has an expropriated quality. When Giorgio Agamben asks "Why does poetry matter to us?" in his essay "Expropriated Manner", he probes the idea that the poet operates with free agency as she gives herself over to the unexpected (Agamben 1999: 93). What is unexpected is the realization that manner, contrary to how the notion is generally perceived, as a twisted style, has in fact the same positive connotations as style. Agamben goes on to emphasize the importance of the medium of language which unites all opposing positions. Insofar as the poet "produces life" in the word, life produced in the poem "withdraws from both the lived experience of the psychosomatic individual and the biological unsayability of the species" (93). For Agamben expropriation links style to manner insofar as expropriation is seen as the experience of the poet who voluntarily gives up of herself. The manner in which the poet renounces her identity becomes the style that her poetry assumes.

Lynn Emanuel's registering of titles as names precisely at the point where the speaker wants to "cast off Symbolisms" parallels Agamben's insight for whom the poet's experience is an experience of style. As Emanuel appraises Thought's bias against the unanticipated, she seems to ask a similar question: Why do titles matter to us? When Agamben renders the notions of style and manner as two realities that correlate, he seems to suggest that in poetry the proliferation of titles must occur first through the prism of the untitled. Emanuel sees the poetic realm as the whiteness and nakedness of an aesthetics which perplexes every time a title is opposed consciously to the untitled. Says Agamben: "If style marks the artist's most characteristic trait, manner registers an inverse process of expropriation and exclusion. It is as if the old poet, who found his style and reached perfection in it, now forgets it in order to advance the singular claim of expressing himself solely through impropriety" (97).

Agamben's statement brings to mind the work of a symbolist, Henri Michaux and his relation to the expropriation of manner which is similar

to the process of searching for titles by positing them in an improper relation to the untitled. Michaux asks a question in the same manner that Emanuel does when her speaker is anticipating the literature that would take the form of the titles 'in stare', as it were: "Could it be that I draw because I see so clearly this thing or that thing? Not at all. Quite the contrary. I do it to be perplexed again. And I am delighted that there are traps. I look for surprises" (Michaux, 1963). The interesting thing about work dealing with the expropriation of manner in one way or another is that it tends to appear under titles bearing such titles as "Untitled". Michaux's work has also been published under the title *Untitled Passages* which combines a number of his untitled drawings with poems from the volume *Passages* (De Zegher, 2000).

Michaux's research into the passages between "title" and "untitled" can be said to function as a search into the passages between writing and seeing. For Michaux writing is seen as an expression of the improper in drawing, and the consequence of such an expropriation of the proper particularly and conversely in writing has had a strong influence in the work of John Ashbery, who not only translated Michaux but also let Michaux's "untitles" find way into his own poetry. Ashbery himself wrote a prose poem called "Untilted" (Ashbery 1981) – and it is not a spelling mistake! – in which he probes the limitations of language by alluding to the symbolist desire to merge drama and fiction, writing and seeing by designating passages for the expression of the improper manner in a proper style appropriated precisely by and through expropriation. Ashbery's "Untilted" which at first glance one always reads as "Untitled", plays on the visual closeness between tilting and titling. Ashbery thus performs a similar movement of expropriation by leading his poem into a state of proper nonidentity.

Michaux was not just a painter but also a writer of prose poems concerned with the works of symbolism through the movements of darkness. If for symbolists such as Michaux, "language and consciousness", as Ashbery put it, is about expropriating the proper manner of seeing, language and consciousness have a different expropriating manner for poets such as Emanuel who introduces writing as the element which moves darkness not in the realm of whiteness or seeing, but in the realm of nakedness or reading. I recall a statement I made at the beginning of this paper: "Untitled moves" and parallel it with the symbolist thrust: darkness moves.

The reason why Emanuel's speaker wants to cast off symbolisms is due to the poet's experience and who has the ability to produce life in words, name it and give it titles. Emanuel's title, "Naked", at the end of her poem is a title which expropriates precisely the manner in which the poet moves through darkness. On the other hand, the two titles that occur to the speaker towards the end of the poem, namely, "White" and "Naked", emphasize the blank page as an event in waiting for something to happen as it happens. What happens in this case is the untitled title. "White and "Naked", in other words, are clear examples of titles for the "Untitled". Therefore "title" and untitled" can be said to stand in a reciprocal relation to one another, with title becoming some sort of an archive containing the untitled. The title is the style of the untitled manner. Says Agamben:

> Only in their reciprocal relation do style and manner acquire their true sense beyond the proper and the improper. The free gesture of the writer lives in the tension between these two poles: style is an *expropriating appropriation*, a sublime negligence, a self-forgetting in the proper; manner is an *appropriating expropriation*, a presentiment or resemblance of oneself in the improper. Not only in the old poet but in every great writer (Shakespeare!) there is a manner that distances itself from style, a style that expropriates itself into manner. At its height, writing even consists in precisely the interval – or, rather, the passage – between the two. Perhaps in every field but most of all in language, use is a polar gesture: on the one hand, appropriation and habit; on the other, expropriation and nonidentity. And "usage" (in its whole semantic field, as both "to use" and "to be used to") is the perpetual oscillation between a homeland and an exile – dwelling. (Agamben, 1999: 98)

For Lynn Emanuel, Agamben's presentiment as resemblance finds resonance in the identification of titles with the poet. Yet another question that the speaker poses: "That white is a loose shirttail. Does it seem like bragging to say it reminds me of myself?" constitutes a passage à la Michaux's *Untitled Passages* that correlates and corresponds to the idea of dwelling. Titles stand still, I recall yet another line from the beginning of this essay, in the same manner that we can say titles dwell, while

untitled manners pass in the same way that we can say untitled passages move.

Thus for Lynn Emanuel the expropriation of titles is not only contingent on the untitled but also intertextual in the sense that the search for a title becomes the movement towards comprehending not how the writer chooses the titles but how the titles choose the writer. Registering and making an archive for the titles rendered in the poem is a reinforcement of the intertexts that make Emanuel's poems prose poems of becoming. Such intertexts come to the fore in *Then, Suddenly*– through the use of other paratexts, not just titles but also epigraphs. Three epigraphs each standing before each of the three divisions in the book play not on the subjectivization of language but on the subjectivization of becoming. "I", "it" and "you" are the untitled forms of the title "Naked". The epigraph from Calvino with an emphasis on the "I" and the "you": "I am called 'I' and this is the only thing you know about me, but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger 'I'", appraises the unanticipated "it", which is the drive of the performative movement expressed in the Einstein epigraph to part 2: "Nothing happens until something moves". The third epigraph from Gertrude Stein to part 3 in which we find the poem "In Search of a Title" brings "title and "untitled" in a reciprocal relation to narration: "Think of narrative from this thing, a narrative can give emotion because an emotion is dependent upon a succession upon a thing having a beginning and a middle and an end." The overall search for titles in *Then, Suddenly*– culminates in the master epigraph from Edmond Jabès which begins the entire collection: "The book is the subject of the book". Here Emanuel exorcises symbolisms out of the shifting passages between "title" and "untitled". The search for a title constitutes a poem of becoming insofar as it questions the relationship between the realization of self-consciousness and its actualization in estrangement. Thus "In Search of a Title" discloses an instance of "expropriated" mannerism which manifests an "improper" relation of being to becoming.

Title *is*. Untitled *becomes*.

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Titular Tilting in John Ashbery: How to (Un)title a Poem

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Among the numerous poems published by the American poet John Ashbery since his debut in 1956 one finds a few that specifically deal with the issue of entitlement. These poems do not appear in one single of Ashbery's volumes, but are disseminated throughout his career and production. Their occurrence neither follows any particular plan, nor do they form part of a larger poetic or thematic whole in the volumes where they have been published. Rather, they are perhaps better characterized as "typically atypical of Ashbery's poetry"– to put it in paradoxical terms used by John Shoptaw in his 1994 monograph on the poet, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Shoptaw, 1994:14). Despite their semblance of inconspicuousness and conformity with a distinct Ashberian tone, a closer look reveals dislocations that tend to marginalize them not only in relation to companion poems in each volume, but also to Ashbery's poetry in general. If, however, anything links these poems to other poems in his *oeuvre*, it is their marginalization which also extends to the peoms' relation to the poetic as such. Like most of Ashbery's poems, they may look like poems, but very often they turn out to raise significant questions about their very title to poetry.

In the following I shall discuss two ways in which this double marginalizing of Ashbery's entitlement poems may lead to considerations of their potential 'untitled' status. On the one hand, the poem that I am going to look at foregrounds its title or the question of its entitlement and thus overdetermines an element of its paratext at the expense of its text proper.[2] Indeed, the poem subverts the difference between paratext and text, the former overflowing the latter. In this way it is not typical of other Ashbery poems, in which the conventional 'naming' function of

2 I use the term 'paratext' in Gerard Genette's sense when he defines it as "accompanying" textual "productions" that "surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and "consumption" (Genette, 1997: 1). As part of a text's paratext Genette includes such elements as author's name, title, preface, dedication, epigraph, etc.

their titles is not on the face of it brought into focus, but kept in the margins of the texts (Genette, 1997: 76–89).[3]

More interestingly, as I shall demonstrate, the self-reflexivity of the title in this poem tends to suspend its normal entitling function and leaves the poem without proper title. It becomes a meta-title instead. But the poem also becomes untitled in another sense – namely in the sense of 'having no right' (OED) to the name of poetry. For if its titular self-reflexivity causes it to become improperly or insufficiently entitled, the question remains whether it still deserves the right to be identified as a poem. Whatever appearances to the contrary, which include, for instance, line arrangements conventionally associated with poetic writing, the very fact that the poem is a meta-title lends it an air of being stuck in paratexuality and not really having attained the state of full-fledged poetry. Yet, Ashbery does not leave it at that since he at the same time invites an altogether ordinary poetical reading of his titular self-reflections.

Recognized poetic features such as line arrangement, repetition, alliteration, metaphor and others transform a paratextual element (the title) into a text of its own (a poem). The consequences of this paradox are far-reaching for Ashbery's relation to the untitled, insofar as what at first seems to have no title to be called a poem – the title in its capacity of paratext – is furnished with one in his writing. In my readings below I shall also show how the entitling of the untitled extends beyond the question of the generic difference between text and paratext, between the poetic and the non-poetic and becomes a theme in its own right.

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The poem I shall deal with dates from Ashbery's 1994 collection *And the Stars Were Shining*, and may be said to be the most explicit example of his experiments with (un)titling. The poem is interesting not because it is untitled, but because it actually has a title. This title both affirms and denies itself as title. The "title" of the poem is "Title Search" (Ashbery, 1994: 12). I put the word 'title' in quotation marks here because the poem's title "Title Search" appears not to be its true title – unless, of course, this is its true and only title. I shall return to the latter point in a

3 In *Paratexts* Genette suggests that the main function of the title is to 'name' the text, in order to ensure its 'identification' by theme as well as genre.

while. But first let us dwell on the question why "Title Search" does not quite fulfill its entitling function.

As Gerard Genette puts it in his *Paratexts*, "a title, [...] is the 'name' of a [text], and as such it serves to name the [text], that is, to designate it as precisely as possible and without too much risk of confusion" (Genette, 1997: 79). Something similar has been suggested by Jacques Derrida in his lecture essay "Title (to be specified)" when he writes:

> [...], a title always has the structure of a name, inducing the effects of the proper name and under this title it remains in quite a unique fashion, foreign to language as discourse, in the very way it introduces an anormal referential function [...] (Derrida, 1981: 7)

The reasoning behind Derrida's definition of the title is that with its conventional position on the border of the text it functions like a proper name in its unique and "completely singular" reference to this text. "[I]t [...] refer[s] to this text," says Derrida, "across all sorts of other possible references and other semantic values it ostensibly shares with the same [words] [...] which would be found elsewhere in another context" (8). It is nothing less than this function as the proper name of the poem that the title "Title Search" may be said to defy. In the manner of such coded expressions as 'title (to be specified)' or 'title (to be announced later)', which will be well-known to the regular conference goer from preliminary conference programs, or 'in search of a title' familiar from avant-garde poetry, the more quaint "Title Search" reads as a substituting cipher of a proper title still not in place, but on its way. Derrida prefers the metaphor of the blank check to characterize the function of the writerly marks of the (still) untitled:

> [...] the locution, "Title (to be specified)," has come in a provisional fashion to take the place of the title. Like a blank check, it indicated the empty spot of a title to be filled in which, as such, there would be found the *true* title. (6)

Derrida's use of the 'blank check' metaphor and its attendant feature of 'the empty spot to be filled in' is a very apt way to illustrate how writing holds a number of conventional means for representing that temporary absence of the true title which would not otherwise be recognizable.

Although Ashbery's choice of the phrase 'title search' does not yet have a fully acknowledged place among standard locutions of untitledness, it is easy to interpret it as one because it is similar to them both in sound and meaning. I shall soon get back to considering reasons why Ashbery has preferred the "title" "Title Search" over, for instance, "In Search of a Title." For now, we need to clarify to which extent and how "Title Search" suspends the normal naming function of titles insofar as it compares to more commonly known phrases of provisional entitlement.

If an idiomatic expression like 'title (to be specified)' does not function as the proper name of a text as does a true title, it is because it is without the essential feature characterizing the latter, namely its unique reference to the text it entitles. More precisely, the referentiality of the provisional title seems to be of a split nature. Since its function, according to Derrida, is to designate the empty title space to be filled in, its reference could be said to be meta-titular. Instead of naming the text, it turns on its own paratextual context and speaks about the very act of entitlement as an issue in its own right. On the other hand, it also seems to refer beyond both itself and the text to the title that is yet to come. So, if "title (to be specified)" names anything, it is not the text, but the latter's still missing name it proleptically names. In this way, we might claim that the suspended relation of the provisional title in relation to the text is very much due to its doubly displaced reference in its capacity as meta-title and titular proxy.

Although Ashbery's "title" "Title Search" appears not to be the 'true' title of his poem and hence does not name it, it presents at the same time a more complex case. On the one hand, the resemblance of the phrase 'title search' to more conventional locutions such as 'in search of a title' would indicate that its function in the poem is to mark its lack of a proper title. On the other hand, Ashbery has capitalized its central words, which is the common way of signifying the title of a text. This inherent duplicity of Ashbery's title "Title Search" means that apart from functioning as the poem's temporary title, it can just as easily be read at its 'true' title. The implications this has for a reading of the poem will be elaborated on later on.

If we return to the question of the choice of the phrase "Title Search", I will suggest that it can be seen as Ashbery's late modern attempt to update the catalogue of stock phrases available to poetry, signaling that one's poem does not yet have any proper title. Ashbery has borrowed the

term from the cybermedial world of electronic library and book databases, where 'title search' as opposed to 'author search' and 'subject search' is the name of a particular search method by which one enters a keyword in a blank in order to search for titles containing this word. As Ashbery's poem only bears the title "Title Search", it seems to indicate that the latter signifies none other than the blank space – mentioned by Derrida in the quote above – that is in due time to be filled in by the poem's true title and proper naming. What is of even more importance at this turn is, however, that by choosing "Title Search" over "In Search of a Title" or just simply "Untitled" as a title for his poem Ashbery defamiliarizes somewhat more automated phrases for poetic untitledness. For the intertextual reference to a computer-generated title-searching method highlights two aspects of untitledness usually kept in the background.

Not least – and this also applies to "In Search of a Title" – does it draw attention to the fact that the proverbial blank space on the border of every untitled poem may just be a cover for a bootless pursuit of a fitting title apparently still in process at the time of the poem's publication – rather than a sign of classical dignity or solemnity.[4] More specifically, Ashbery's "title" signifies the last resort or the short cut which postmodern information society offers the poet in terms of prosthesis for missing poetic inspiration. In this way he parodies the naturalness of the absence as well as the presence of titles in poems by alluding to the material conditions of their writing, where deadlines, wasted energy at the computer screen and messiness matter no less than the final product. To this must be added that "Title Search" also surrounds itself with what Stephen Matterson and Darryl Jones in *Studying Poetry* have called "the noise of technology" (Matterson and Jones, 2000: 165). For the "title" could, indeed, suggest that the poem's lack of a true title somehow involves the virtually endless list of networked title suggestions that the poet's entering of a single keyword in a library search engine is bound to generate.

4 Cf. Genette: "some of [Victor Hugo's] poems have no titles, particularly in the second part of *Les Contemplations*, as if the solemnity of the subject (one thinks of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*) required this reserve" (1997: 314) and "In some collections the absence of intertitles signals an intention to maintain classical dignity: Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Bonnefoy's *Douve*, almost everything by Emily Dickinson and Saint-John Perse" (315). The convention of titling poems is, as Genette points out, a post-classical invention. Poetry in classical antiquity was predominantly untitled.

Instead of affirming the above-mentioned convention according to which a title represents the proper name of a text, "Title Search" situates its own entitling in a cultural context where the digitalized technology for producing and consuming literature renders a title just one choice among several other equally valid candidates, and one at that which you may easily have borrowed from elsewhere. The information overload which a library search engine is capable of spawning makes it painfully clear to the user what sins of omission he may always risk committing when choosing a title from the list offered and to which extent a title is never very original. The "title" of Ashbery's poem reminds us of the implications of postmodern information technology for entitling texts and in turn becomes a meta-title reflecting on the question of what is a poetic title under specific cultural conditions of writing literature.

Ashbery's play with the conventions of entitlement does not stop at the limit traditionally reserved for the title's paratextual inscription above the body of poetic text itself. As pointed out earlier, he dissolves the distinction between paratext and text, and in the case of "Title Search" he lets the poem's five stanzas compose one or more lists of titles. Quite literally, the paratext of the poem thereby seems to extend its work beyond the conventionally assigned limits of the paratextual by forcing an entry into the place of the text proper. Its "title" being "Title Search," the forty-five titles in, rather than of, Ashbery's poem could very well be seen as a textual representation of all the 'true' titles the poet has hit upon, considered or skipped as potential replacements for the blank space. The cultural reference to title searches on the library computer is even maintained, as, for example, the first three titles of the poem are names of classic Johann Strauss compositions and could stand for the search results which entering the key word 'Strauss' would have produced. Thus, the poem itself tends to make explicit the labour of finding a title for the poem, which its "title" "Title Search" only leaves implicit or, as just argued, synecdochically alludes to by conjuring up its culturally specific context of library visits and electronic browsing. Even more important is it, however, that it dislocates the often taken-for-granted hierarchically ordered relationship between text and paratext in a poem, and this has a somewhat amusing and cranky effect just as it raises serious questions about whether the poem deserves the title to poetry in the end.

In fact, Ashbery's paratextual games could be said to be doubly transgressive. For not only does his poem consist of a long list of titles,

whose proper place would be elsewhere, these titles even seem to belong to that category of the paratextual that Gerard Genette has dubbed the epitext and should not have been in the poem in the first place. That is, Ashbery's list of titles in "Title Search" looks like a list of working titles, as I have just pointed out, and in that respect the reader would have expected them to conform to Genette's definition of an epitext. Writes Genette:

> The criterion distinguishing the epitext from the peritext – that is (according to our conventions), distinguishing the epitext from all the rest of the paratext – is in theory purely spatial. The epitext is any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space. The location of the epitext is therefore anywhere outside the book [...] (Genette, 1997: 344)

Genette's main point that epitexts as opposed to peritexts are not, as he puts it, "inserted into the interstices of the text" certainly applies to the normal functioning of working titles (5). After its publication such paratexts as notes, drafts, manuscripts or preliminary titles, which Genette also terms a text's pre-texts, mostly stay physically removed from it. Either they end up in the author's bin never to be seen again, on the shelves of his study, or get filed in his official archive after his death. For a postmodern poet like Ashbery the likelihood is that they have no other record than that of the electronic database or file. The exception to this rule is, of course, if a scholarly edition of the text is published posthumously, and the editor includes them – if available – as appendices or quotes them in critical notes, thus securing their "later admission to the peritext" (344).

This is precisely both the case and not the case with Ashbery's poem. On the one hand, he literally footnotes the dirty work of his search for a proper title. On the other, he does it in a place which is normally barred to such editorial appendages. For the doubly transgressive act of the poem consists not only in warping the relationship between text and paratext, but also in turning into the text proper a part of its paratext whose textual location would usually be situated "at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance" from it (4). So, instead of writing a poem Ashbery has produced a text that might strictly speaking be better characterized as

merely a pure pre-text for one – in the literal as well as the figurative sense of that word. It passes for a poem, yet it is composed of textual elements which the reader would expect to find in the author's notebooks or in the virtual reality of the digitalized library databases. The implications of that are far-reaching, which I shall elaborate on in the following.

First of all – and this will bring me back to the question of the untitled in a little while – Ashbery seems to be at the same game as two of his contemporary American colleagues John Wheelwright and A.R. Ammons when in one of his critical essays he refers to them as "stretching our recognition of what a poem can be and in so doing carr[ying] the notion of poetry a little higher and further" (Ashbery, 1973: 3). What especially distinguishes these poets, according to Ashbery, is a poetics which I would characterize as very similar to his own in "Title Search." "They both write, he points out:

> as though poetry could not be a vehicle of major utterance, as though it were itself a refutation of any such mythic nonsense; in both the poem is not so much a chronicle of its own making as of its unmaking. (3)

Ashbery's claim is, in other words, that Ammons and Wheelwright's poems represent their own deconstruction as poetry because "the final product looks like a mess of disjointed notes for a poem" (3). "Title Search" perhaps goes even further in deconstructing its own poetic status insofar as it hardly amounts to being 'notes for a poem', while 'notes for a title' would be a more apt generic label to pin onto it. Viewed in isolation as a record of provisional title suggestions for a poem yet to find its proper title, "Title Search" is therefore nothing but (a) titular pre-text. Thus, if so little is in place for Ashbery's poem to have achieved the state of poetry that it is still without a title, it is in fact arguable that it equally lacks the title to be called a poem. As I proposed at the beginning of this paper, Ashbery writes poems that stay in the margins of the poetic because they foreground what poetry usually keeps in the margins, such as the question of their entitlement. It is to a considerable extent in the sense of 'having no right' (*OED*) to poetry that "Title Search" courts the untitled.

Another sense in which "Title Search" is untitled is, of course, the more banal one which I have already alluded to several times. The poem

can be said to have no proper title to name it, but only if we read its title "Title Search" as I proposed above that we could, namely, as an ironically updated version of more conventional ways of signifying a text's untitledness. It is therefore still in search of one, but on top of that we cannot even be sure if there is a poem to entitle insofar as its textual corpus may be read not so much in the way of its poetic text proper but more as a meta-titular incorporation of its pre-text. If such a dislocation of the text-paratext relationship is poetically unconventional, the possibility that no actual text exists to be entitled is perhaps somewhat uncanny. In fact, the poem forecloses every opportunity for its reader to know exactly what it is its many titles – including its preliminary one "Title Search" – are eventually going to name.

Ostensibly representing the poet's hitherto bootless quest for a title for a poem, Ashbery at the same time suspends the conventional 'naming' function, and we saw above how Derrida and Genette consider it to be a constitutive feature of literary entitlement. The main reason why this happens is that the poetic text to be named only has marginal or hypothetical existence, since it has been displaced by the foregrounding of its titular paratext. We might therefore well begin to feel that Ashbery's play with the conventions of entitlement extends beyond the merely playful and turns itself into a simulacrum of entitling.[5] If we accept such a reading of "Title Search," it becomes untitled in a much more fundamental way. We could perhaps say that it has no title primarily because it raises more questions than it answers about what its titles are meant to entitle.

In the first place, it is impossible to decide if the poem's "title" "Title Search" and its excess of title suggestions only feign the naming of a poem that has never existed in the first place, or if the absent poem it attempts to name is perfectly unnameable. Either way, the poem to be named remains textually out of place, while the act of entitlement has taken its place, yet never really seems to take place. In J. L. Austin's terms, the poem's speech act is *unhappy*, as it were, and for two entirely different, but mutually exclusive reasons. Either the poem presents a case of what Austin called an *abuse* of the speech act of entitlement, or it is a *misfire* since it cannot be completed (cf. Austin, 1975: 12–24). In the end, the reader is invited to regard the untitled status of "Title Search" as a result

5 I use the word 'simulacrum' in the sense which Jean Baudrillard has given it.

of an odd double bind. Either Ashbery's poem violates the topological code of textual entitlement, according to which a title only appears on the border of the work and in accord with this encoded position always reveals an intention to name it, *or* the poem is a representation of the titular remains left behind by a poet in search of a title for a poem that cannot properly be named. For the same reason, the untitledness of Ashbery's poem seems to derive from an uneasy teetering on the brink of the humorously ironic and the respectably serious. This ambiguity is, moreover, affirmed by the juxtaposition of tonally opposite-sounding title suggestions in the first line of the poem, which lists "Voices of Spring" and "Vienna Bonbons" after one another, only to be topped by the oddly self-contradictory compound "Mourning Polka" in line 2, where 'mourning' is spelt with a 'u'. The reader is in the end left wondering if the whole poem is just a literary spoof, and what the 'real' poem will be about if "Title Search" represents its unfinished titular prolepsis.

Whatever the reader of Ashbery's poem is expected to believe is the case, it is the foregrounding of the titular paratext that paradoxically gives rise to its untitledness. At the same, this is also what creates uncertainty about the significance of its lack of a proper title or a properly performed act of entitlement. In fact, as I suggested above, the poem may even be said to have a meta-titular function, reflecting on the conditions of entitling and not least their cultural specificity. In the latter case it seems at first glance easier to explain why the proper naming function of its "title" has been suspended. When Ashbery puts the poem's titular pre-text in the place where we would most often have a poetic text proper, he highlights its provisional title "Title Search" and directs his reader's attention to an aspect of poetry writing which does not have the same dignified aesthetic quality about it as the finished work.

In the thinking of poetry which became popular with New Criticism in the early 20th century and dominated the literary institution up until after WWII, the favoured metaphor for the ideal poem was one stressing its aesthetic perfection, autonomy and unification of form and content. Examples range from Cleanth Brooks's notion of the poem as 'a well-wrought urn' to Wimsatt and Beardsley's idea that it constitutes 'a verbal icon'. Ashbery's jumble of working titles does not even come close to such an ideal of poetry. I will therefore suggest that "Title Search" may be seen as a playful critique of a remnant poetic ideology, enacted by way of a changed poetic practice. For Ashbery includes in his poem what the

new critic would exclude or consider marginalia. And what he chooses to include is the materiality of its textual production in the real world, which among other aspects counts the search for a title, but which in turn displaces the illusion of its aesthetic perfection.

Borrowing a term from the American novelist Raymond Federman, Brian McHale has called this feature 'textual displacement' and seen it as characteristic of the ontological tendency in postmodern literature to ask questions about a text's "mode of being," poised as it is between "the real-world object, the [text] which shares our world with us, and the fictional objects and world which the text projects" (McHale, 1987: 181, 180). So, one way to account for the lack of a proper title in Ashbery's poem and its emphasis on the quest for one would be that he de-idealizes the notion of what a poem can be. For as I shall demonstrate in a short while, framing a poem's titular pre-text as poetic text in its own right tends to entitle it to the name of poetry in a way unthinkable to the New Critics.

Another way to explain what significance pertains to the fact that "Title Search" is practically untitled or not yet properly entitled would be to ponder what it means for the poem that it merely consists of notes for the title of a poem whose mode of existence the reader can only speculate about. Above we saw that the reader is even left in doubt to which extent "Title Search" represents a real or a purely fictional attempt at naming the poem which the numerous title suggestions seemingly invoke, but also displace. My hunch is that Ashbery extends his ontological investigation of poetry so as to comprise poetic titles as well. If, as I have already pointed it may in Ashbery's poem, poetic entitlement steers an uncertain course between representing a joke and a genuine act, then it raises questions about how much stock should be taken in the titles of poems in general. A closer reading of the poem will reveal that these are questions that are not answered in any definitive way.

One initial complication is the fact that apart from representing a long list of title suggestions the many titles in the poem are also arranged *as* a poem. Not only do they come in five stanzas of unequal length, they follow a pattern where some lines alternately number two titles, while others have three or just one. In addition, the latter formal pattern has its exceptions to this rule, insofar as some of the line breaks present cases of run-on lines, leaving two lines with two and a half titles, one with half a title, and one with one and a half title (see stanzas 1 and 2). Similarly, the poem includes examples of alliteration, assonance and punning as in lines

1, 2 and 3 in the stanza where we find "Voices of Spring. Vienna Bonbons./*Morning P*apers. Visiting Firemen. *Mourning P*olka./[...]/-*Agripp*a. *Agripp*ine [...]" (my emphasis). Such conventional poetic framing devices tend to suspend the impression that "Title Search" necessarily represents an attempt to foreground the titular paratext at the expense of the poem itself. As Jonathan Holden has remarked of a tendency in postmodern poets to write poems which consist of "found" written material, often lifted from a non-poetic source that it turns into poetry through the use of conventional poetic framing devices:

> [...] the way in which a piece of literature is framed – a prose, as verse, as found art, or as a prose poem – has a decisive influence on our expectations and determines which strategy we will use in reading it, *regardless of the inherent properties of its language*. (Holden, 1980: 26)

Despite the fact that Ashbery's title suggestions retain their linguistic properties of titles through capitalization, their re-contextualization in a poetic framework certainly has an impact on the way in which we read them in their new context. First of all, stanza form, alliteration, assonance, repetition and other such poetic devices tend to make the reader ask the same questions that I think Ashbery's poem also asks: How does a list of titles deserve the title to poetry at all? And if it does, what sense, if any, can we make of their organization on the page? Does it, for example, give rise to the telling of a story that thematically calls for the poem's title "Title Search"? Or is the poem just an amusing poetic game that explores how much aesthetic enjoyment can be derived from arranging a random number of titles according to their sound quality. Such questions make it rather difficult simply to view Ashbery's poem as a pure representation of working titles for a poem not yet written. Instead, it may be read as dealing with the ontological question of whether the results of a title search on the library electronic database can be turned into a poem and be enjoyed accordingly.

Still, there is the possibility of reading the poem as the record of the paratextual remains of the poet's search for a title, which will name a not yet written, perhaps even unwriteable and unnameable poem. If we are invited to read "Title Search" that way as well, this is due to the fact that the citing of such a poem's titular pre-text may constitute the only textual representation of its proper title and existence. Even if Ashbery's poem

does not definitively underwrite such a reading of it, I shall wager the suggestion in concluding this paper that among the titles featuring in the poem many of them are references to past cultural phenomena whose proper naming was left unresolved, or lost their title to official existence. For example, Agrippa refers to a 15th century German mystic and alchemist who was also given the names of charlatan, demonic magician, and even vampire. The House on 42nd Street used to be the euphemistic name of strip shows on 42nd street which the authorities cracked down on in the 1920, driving them underground and out of the view of the public eye. Correspondingly, the poem contains purely fictional titles as well – for instance, "Memoirs of a Hermit Crab". Such a title would seem to fit with a reading of the poem as an unsuccessful quest for a title to name what cannot be named properly. The hermit crab has a shell to protect itself from environmental stress. The memoirs of a hermit crab – if we can imagine such a thing – would then be very likely not to name things properly, but only in disguise.

If such a reading of "Title Search" is feasible, then we might claim that the untitled – both in the sense of having no proper name and in the sense of the illegitimate – becomes a theme in its own right.

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Tales, Titles, Tails: Negotiations of Genre in the (Short) Fiction of Alasdair Gray

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This paper examines paratextual markers of title, authorship and genre in three collections of short fiction and one novel by Alasdair Gray, with special attention to issues revolving around titling, over-titling and un-titling as they play themselves out in these works. Gray's work always seems to have an almost baroque amount of titles and subtitles framing it, but the paradoxical effect of this overabundant titling is to make the reader seek the core titular element in each work and refer to the work with this coded abbreviation of titles (an effect also found in the practice of Raymond Federman, who himself refers to his novels by codes such as *TIOLI*, an acronym composed out of the title words "Take It Or Leave It", which form only the first five words in this over-titled work's 17-word title). In Gray's case one might argue that his practice of over-titling tilts his works towards being in the process of un-titling themselves.

Gray, however, is also well known for his lavish use of illustrations, which normally feature his own artwork, helping not only to add a rich dialogism to his text, but also adding to the multiplicity of titles Gray can said to own to his work. In fact, his whole use of paratext such as prefaces, marginalia, tables of content, emblems and epigraphs, self-authored blurbs etc. indicates an acute awareness on his part of how such paratext helps construct his authorial role. Following Gerard Genette's theory of the forms and functions of paratextuality, the article sketches out a contribution to the field of postmodern short story and fiction poetics, building on insights highlighted by Gray's ludic practice.

Gray uses multiple generic markers in the titles and subtitles of his short story collections: *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (1983); *Ten Tales Tall and True: Social Realism, Sexual Comedy, Science Fiction, Satire* (1993); *The Ends of Our Tethers: Sorry Stories by Alasdair Gray* (2003). Often, in fact, these markers are set up by the title and then undercut by the subtitles and/or other paratextual commentary. Such paratext, including emblematic

illustrations (ten tails in *Ten Tales*) and self-authored critical comments (often presented as blurb text), further embellishes Gray's collections, while simultaneously destabilizing the readers' understanding of the works' and the author's ontological position(s). The most obvious effects of this plethora of paratextuality are to render the enunciation position of the paratextual speakers unreliable, forcing the reader to accept the collections as ludic, heteroglossic books. The example of one of Gray's novels, *Poor Things: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer, Edited by Alasdair Gray* (1992) serves as a counterpoint in the description and analysis of the story collections.

Internally in the fictions a mixture of conventions and forms from other fields of writing, such as historiography, the essay, journalism, autobiography and other non-fiction modes, creates a rich mélange of contexts, paradoxically evoked as fictional by Gray's 'stories'. He further creates a tapestry of fictional modes, borrowing tropes from fantasy, science fiction and pornography in his story (and novel) practice. The end result is a neo-baroque/post-modern cross-aesthetic short fiction, which when presented as collections (one appearing each decade since the 1980s) packs a punch not normally associated with short story sequences. I propose to read Gray's short story collection practice as emblematic of a new, postmodern venture into packaging and theming of short story sequences as a medium for social commentary, satire and political critique, equally as efficient as the more common form to contain satire, the novel.

Paratext as a theoretical concept

In *Paratexts - Thresholds of Interpretation* the French critic and theorist, Gerard Genette, continues his project of classifying a system of textualities, collected under the general heading of transtextuality (Genette, 1987: xv). Transtextuality is another name for a moment of textual transcendence or everything that brings the text in relation with other texts. Transtextuality thus includes everything we normally refer to as intertextuality between texts, as well as all forms of commentary and textual criticism. For this broad term to become operational Genette has

subdivided the types of transcendence into five: Intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality.

Intertextuality for Genette represents only the instance of presence of one text within another, and most often literal presence in the form of quotation. *Paratextuality*, which is the chief subject of this paper, is briefly definable as the presence of liminal texts that mediate between the text as book/object and the world surrounding this book/object, i.e. title, indications of author name, forewords, dedications, epigraphs and all other framing and dividing devices surrounding or interpolated in the text proper. *Metatextuality* is virtually synonymous with commentary and criticism. *Hypertextuality* deals with palimpsesting of existing texts in the forms of imitation, parody and pastiche (another widespread practice in Gray, which will have to be left for a later paper). *Architextuality*, finally, deals with genre characteristics and links generic concerns of texts with a larger system of discourse types and enunciation modalities.

Genette's own introduction to his monograph on the paratext gives us in its opening paragraph a mixture of a definition of and a credo for the paratext as concept. It will be noted that the paratext in its marginal situation in relation to the book's text proper is nevertheless re-situated at the very centre of importance for the reception of the book's text, as Genette claims that the paratext is what makes a book a book in its object form:

> A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called the work's *paratext*. [...] For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to

> become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. (1)

The roles/functions ascribed to the paratext in this quote are worth extracting for closer scrutiny. The "verbal or other productions" are placed around the text, 'booking' it as it were, by *adorning* it, *reinforcing* it, and *accompanying* it. These potential roles of the paratext, while casually listed by Genette, can hardly be said to express equivalent functions, since the difference between adorning and reinforcing must be regarded as significant. It is easy to see that a cover, for instance, may be an adornment perhaps through the aestheticism of its illustrations or design. It may however be more difficult to see how a cover re-enforces a book unless one means by making it able to stand upright on one's bookshelf. The meaning of accompanying may also seem mystifying, since this indicates something which has separate object-status from the book, something that follows the book, but which is not the book. This is, however, if one takes Genette seriously, exactly what he means, since for him a book's paratext need not exist contemporarily with the book's (first) publication, but can pre-exist it or post-date by any amount of time.

Turning to the aspects of the paratext which have to do with reading and reception of the book/object, which I, in line with reception aesthetics, would argue is essentially what makes a book a book, Genette says:

> Indeed, this fringe [the paratext], always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

This is the strongest argument presentable for focusing on paratextual phenomena when reading texts in a certain genre protocol or other protocol for reception. If Genette is right in his capsule formulation that the paratext is the primary locus for transaction between work and its ghostly presence of author on the one hand and reader on the other, then

indeed an analysis that does not read a work's paratext is sadly inadequate.

We turn now to Gray's three collections (and one of his novels) in order to examine in some detail the workings of his paratextual network.

Unlikely Stories, Mostly

As with most of Gray's books there is a tension between the title and content of Gray's first collection. In the case of Unlikely Stories, Mostly, the title is most obviously commented upon by the presence of two stories, each presented as "A Likely Story..." (Gray, 1983: 172–173). These two brief texts mirror each other, in a manner literalised by their attendant illustrations which are each other's exact mirror image. The stories both thematise issues of rejection in the life of a couple. In the "Nonmarital Setting" on the left hand side, the woman does the rejecting; in the "Domestic Setting" on the right hand side, the man does the rejecting and breaking up of the relationship. These ironic bookends (as they end the volume, they doubly function as bookends and ends to the book) display a merry-go-round of misunderstandings. The male is first accused of his lover of taking things too seriously, and thereupon displays a complete lack of responsibility and seriousness in his denial of responsibility for domestic matters such as rent, electricity bills and food. The reader at the end of this volume can but wonder what misunderstandings he or she has been led into by Gray's mirrors.

If, for example, we read the volume title as referring to a quantity of stories as 'unlikely' and a minority as 'likely', both the titles and the extreme mundanity and triviality of the contents of these two vignettes seem to point to the other stories of the volume as the 'unlikely' ones. However, we can also read the "Mostly" of the collection's title to mean a qualitative designation, so that each story can be regarded as 'mostly unlikely', and by implication then also something 'likely'. This latter reading is richer in its possibility for ironies and seems more in the spirit of Gray's usual ludic practice.

The remaining paratext of this first collection is extremely complex, consisting of numerous emblematic elements, such as hands pointing, astronomical/astrological symbols, floral decorations, examples of calli-

graphy etc. etc. There are several references to issues of government (for example to Hobbes' *Leviathan*), and overtly nationalistic exhortations as indeed the emblem which functions both as frontispiece to and closing image of the volume. This emblem represents a tartan'ed mermaid pointing her finger towards the future (signaled by the inscription "Scotland 1984" (or in the hardbound edition, "Scotland 1983"), which at the time of publication was a future date), and seemingly pronouncing "Work as if you were in the early days of a better nation" (Gray, 1983 (no pagination)). Gray actually reused the epigraphic line on the cover of his 1992 novel, *Poor Things*, where it captions a bed of thistles (the national symbol of Scotland) and is revealed in the colophon to be a quote from "a poem by Denis Leigh" (Gray, 1992 (no pagination)). The epigraph also adorns the cover of *The Book of Prefaces* (2000), this time surrounded by flags of four nations, including the Scottish Saltire or St. Andrew's Cross. Thus, the theme of Scotland possessing a utopian potential saturates many of the volume's stories and recurs in later Gray publications.

In sum, *Unlikely Stories* possesses a political thrust in its whole as designed book/object, which the individual stories could not possibly communicate as strongly as the collected package does. The triviality of some of the themes alters when communicated as part of a political message that all actions of contemporary Scots should be seen as directed towards a betterment of both personal and political settings.

Ten Tales Tall and True

The 1993 volume's game of titles plays itself out through two main jokes. The first is the pun on tales and tails which we have already referred to briefly. This game is turned into one of heads and tails by the volume's illustrations which alternate between showing us details of the animals which serve as emblems for each story – the tails being shown on the front cover, and the heads of the same animals twice encircling the table of contents in the book. That many of the stories also feature a sting in the tail/tale further underscores this punning complex. The second joke lies in the inscription under the two pages of the table of contents which reads: "This book contains more tales than ten so the title is a tall tale too. I would spoil my book by shortening it, spoil the title if I made it

true" (Gray, 1993: 8–9). Indeed the volume contains twelve tales plus a prologue and an epilogue. The title could thus well have read "Twelve Tales Tall and True", and the title would in fact not have been spoiled by being made (more) true. Gray's point must therefore lie elsewhere, and again the quantitative approach leads us astray. Rather, the oxymoronic tension between tall and true tales is the qualitative point Gray wants to make. Just as the first volume's stories were both likely and unlikely, this volume's tales are both lies and truths in a deeper sense.

The volume is also rich in intertextual games, stretching from the dedication's plagiarism of the dedication of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, to the numerous discarded beginnings cited and critiqued in "Getting Started – A Prologue". Here Poe, Melville, The Gospels, Charlotte Brontë and others are rejected as appropriate appropriated beginnings. Only Ambrose Bierce finds favor with his beginning to "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". "That's the style for me", the voice rejecting the other options declares (Gray, 1993: 11). The voice of spectral indeterminacy in Bierce's story very aptly suits Gray's purpose of dialogical tension between fictional lie and fictional truth.

It is also in *Ten Tales* that Gray fully establishes his Baroque, paratextual borrowings. The emblems of the first volume now are supplemented, not only with pro- and epilogue, but also with extended tables of content (every recto page features a new section title, referring to the occurrences on the present double page), so typical of the Baroque novel and numerous postmodern pastiches thereof. Gray's practice of self-penning his back cover blurbs also continues here. The 1983 volume had featured ridiculous and obvious fabrications written under the pen names of "Col. Sebastian Moran" (moronic and inane), and "Lady Nicola Stewart" writing in "The Celtic Needlewoman" (simultaneously vapid and pompous) (Gray, 1983, back cover). *In Ten Tales* the blurb is simpler and more elegant, and it features Gray writing about himself and his future projects in the third person with gentle ironies, such as labeling himself not only "an elderly Glasgow pedestrian", but even a man who "supports himself by the pleasant exercise of writing and illustrating popular fiction". (Gray, 1993, back cover) This profession from bygone days both accurately describes and misrepresents Gray and his artistic agenda, which consists of making popular the avantgardistic techniques he favors, while at the same time making the popular and simple complicated and duplicitous, via his many personae and voices.

Gray's novel from the same period, *Poor Things*, is one other culmination of paratextual gluttony in Gray's oeuvre (another is of course his *The Book of Prefaces* (2000)). In his lengthy preface to this novel Gray comments on the practice of chapter summaries through subtitles. The conceit of this novel is that Gray pretends to have edited a found manuscript by a Victorian Scottish doctor, McCandless, and Gray cites McCandless's paratext as lengthy, and his own as a "snappier" version. Since Gray is the actual author of all of the text, he is in other words parodying his own tendencies toward grotesque paratext in this introduction.

Poor Things: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer, Edited by Alasdair Gray, to cite the (very) full title of the novel, also contains two flap texts, titled respectively "Blurb for a High-Class Hardback" and "Blurb for a Popular Paperback" (Gray, 1992: unpaginated flap text). The two texts present two entirely different novels, carefully targeted for each their separate audience. The "High-Class" version is overtly political, plays with Gray's image as a post-modernist (claiming he has now reverted to a Victorian style), and promises good clean love stories with no hints of perversion. Not surprisingly, the "popular" blurb reverses the sales pitch and emphasizes the novel's racy depictions of sexual practices, mysterious occurrences and villains getting their justified come-uppance. The reverse flap contains a typical Gray forgery, printing purported review excerpts, from the unlikely titled publications *Private Nose* and *The Times Literary Implement*. One review is positive, but quite misguided in its reading of the novel; the other is conservative in thrust and utterly rejects the book's merits. Again Gray lampoons his actual critics by writing more damaging reviews of his work than the critics themselves are capable of bringing themselves to doing.

Gray's (hitherto) final volume of short fiction, appropriately titled *The Ends of Our Tethers* (since that is where it puts us, and that is where its author feels he is currently), has updated the self-penned blurb of *Ten Tales* to read: "Alasdair Gray is a fat, bespectacled, balding, increasingly old Glasgow pedestrian". The tone of bitterness is sharpened here, and the author's profession is also described less playfully and nostalgically as "writing and designing eighteen books, most of them fiction" (Gray, 2003, flap text). Again the problem of whether to read the "most of them" as quantitative or qualitative designation arises. This particular volume highlights the tension between fiction and non-fiction in extremely pertinent ways. One of the "Sorry Stories" (again an appellation which can be read as either a self-critique (meaning pathetic) or as a designation of tonality (sad), or as expressive of the author's penitent mood (I'm sorry!)) in fact appeared originally as a chapter in a political pamphlet Gray put out in 1997 under the title *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*. This and much other information Gray has grown accustomed to putting in appendices to his volumes, titled variously "Critic Fodder" or "Critic Fuel". No critic in his or her right mind would of course dare to trust such info from an unreliable narrator/author such as Gray...

The 2003 volume is even more emblematically illustrated than its two predecessors are. The tethered man on the front cover; the image of Eve eating the forbidden fruit while gazing both seductively and furtively at someone off to the reader's right; the skull of a demon, sometimes with, sometimes without goat horns – all these images recur numerous times in the design of the book. Gone are the lavish calligraphy, the playful embellishments and most of the baroque features of text. Gray's more bitterly politicized and despairing views are clearly underscored by this almost puritan use of illustration (by Gray's standards). Only after the reader unwraps the dust jacket and examines the hard cover does one see a more positive chord struck. Not unusually for Gray the advice printed on the cover must be read backwards: "Remember everything and keep your head! Seamus Heaney – Station Island" (Gray, 2003: front and back cover). This exhortation forms a neat bookend to the future oriented

advice of the frontispiece emblem of Gray's first collection (the quote from Dennis Leigh (sometimes spelled "Lee" by Gray). This volume is past oriented (perhaps because the Glasgow pedestrian has little future left), but typically ambiguous: Do we keep our head in the sense of keeping our cool, or is Heaney's line here brought to remind us of the many, many Scots who literally lost their head in the protracted battles (for independence, religion, ideology etc.) through Scotland's history?

Conclusion

Gray's paratextual practices, not least his titling games, always increase the already multifarious interpretation possibilities inherent in his fictions. The packaging and design of three of these volumes as story collections increases their potential manifold, not only in polyphonic and hetero-glossic meaning, but also in political impact. These satires (a label appropriate for all the story collections and the novel examined) present themselves as simultaneously baroque, Victorian and postmodern chimeras that press themselves on more than one type of audience. The academic *magister ludi* who desires play of signifiers for their own sake, as well as the Scots nationalist finds a summation from the master of Scottish literature of the late 20th century being offered as an irresistible milestone once every decade.

Gray is currently so marginalized in British arts and letters that some of the best Gray scholars are Spanish, Portuguese and Scandinavian, rather than of his own nationality. I hope, as Gray surely has done, that these volumes will in time by read by enough of his peers to redress this imbalance. The act of packaging and thereby 'booking' the stories as elaborately as Gray has done is the prerequisite for the continuing *making present* of their messages.

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